

Judges of the Netherworld as Snakes?
A Study of an Unusual Scene in Spell 125B of the Book of the Dead in
Pap. BM 10489

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THE TEXT of Spell 125B¹ points to forty-two judges who should be called upon by the deceased to emphasize their purity. The court judges are classified into two categories: deities and demons. Some of them are major deities, such as: Re, Atum, Thot, Horus, Ptah, Sobek, Seth, Wepwawet, Nefertem, and Ihy. However, most of judges are demons, and they could be categorized into the following manifestations of supernatural beings: (a) snakes, (b) apes, (c) theomorphic demons, and (d) group of that has fiery form of appearance². These demons were regarded as guardian demons³ who are connected to specific places that they are destined to protect from chaos. They were supposed to be benevolent towards the deceased who held the secret knowledge of their names and places to which they were attached to, as well as the sins that should be denied before them.

In most funerary papyri dating back to the New Kingdom, court judges are usually depicted in anthropomorphic standing, or squatted mummified form, sometimes with the feather of *M3'.t* upon their heads. They can be fully portrayed in human form, or they can be manifest in hybrid forms, such as having animal heads. Contrary to this pattern, the papyrus of *'Imn-htp* depicts these judges in ophidian guise which is an unusual form of appearance for judges in this corpus of documents [fig. 1-2]. The papyrus of *'Imn-htp* is kept in the British Museum (BM EA 10489.8-9 Recto), and it comes from Thebes. It dates back to the 18th dynasty between the reign of the King Thutmose III and the King Amenophis II⁴.

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² R. EL-KEMALY, "Ancient Egyptian Court judges of the Netherworld", MA unpublished thesis, Helwan University, 2014, pp. 218-220.

³ R. LUCARELLI "The Guardian Demons of the Book of the Dead", *BMSAES* 15, 2010, p. 13 (online, [Accessed 16 March 2023]:

https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20190801114227/https://www.britishmuseum.org/research/publications/online_journals/bmsaes/issue_15/lucarelli.aspx.

⁴ B.J. PETERSON, "Fragmente aus einem Totenbuch der 18 dynastie", *Orsu* 16, Uppsala, 1967, 1968, p. 16; I. MUNRO, *Untersuchungen zu den Totenbuch-papyri der 18 dynasty-Kriterien ihrer Daterung*, London, New York, 1988, p. 291; S. DOLL, *Annual Meeting ARCE*, Boston, 1981, p. 30.

Given the highly unusual representation of judges of the afterlife observed in this papyrus, it is important to fully understand its meanings. We know that snakes played an important role in the everyday life of ancient Egyptians. Different functions and meanings were associated with snakes in ancient Egypt and a variety of names were used to evoke them⁵, the most common of which was *hf3w*⁶.

The snakes likewise played different roles in the Netherworld and were depicted in many forms of appearance; they were considered a grave danger for the deceased and the ancient Egyptians expressed this fear in funerary texts. For example, the *Pyramid Texts* contained a variety of spells aiming at avoiding the danger of snakes, such as: Spells 226-243, 276-299, 375-399 and also Spells 314, 499-500, 502, 538, 549-551. In addition to the Spell 885 of the *Coffin Texts*, the spell is supposed to ward off the snake *Rrk* in the necropolis.

The Book of the Dead explicitly refers to the extermination of snakes: spells 7 and 17 feature the killing of the snake *3pp*, and spells 33, 34, 35, 37, 39, 40, and 41 represent the deceased spearing a snake as a symbol of evil⁷. There is another example of destroying snake *3pp* in the seventh hour of the *Book of the Amduat* depicting the conflict between him, the sun god Re, and Isis holding her arm against him⁸. However, snakes were not always seen as dangerous. In the realm of the Dead, in particular, snakes seem to play a benevolent role for the deceased. This concept was represented in the papyrus of *Imn-htp*. In this document, the depiction of snakes confers some mythical and magical functions on them, such as: providing protection from enemies, standing as symbols of resurrection and regeneration in the afterlife, and granting eternal support in the afterlife.

The Myriad Functions of Snakes

1. The Role of Snakes as Protectors

Snakes played an important role as protectors and guardians for houses and sacred places⁹, and the ancient Egyptians, accordingly, considered snakes protectors of the Gates of the Netherworld. Spell 1052 of the *Coffin Texts* allude to snakes who guard almost everything in the hereafter: fields, sands, stones and lakes. They are also represented as gatekeepers; they watch over certain gates as in the *Book of the Dead* which contains four spells (from 144 to 147) that include groups of snakes as guardians of the gates¹⁰. *The Book of the Gates* depicts snakes as guardians, a tall up-tailing serpent represented in each of the door Leafs to indicate their protection and domination over the entrance gateways¹¹.

Besides, the snake played a role as protector for the sun god in his barque ; the snake *Mhn* protects the sun god Re during his journey. This scene could be seen in the *Book of Gates*¹²,

⁵ *Wb* VI, 132–133.

⁶ *Wb* III, 72, 14-20.

⁷ T.G. ALLEN, *The Book the Dead or going forth by day*, SAOC 37, Chicago, 1974, p. 9; R. FAULKNER, *The Book of the Dead. A Collection of Spells Edited and Translated by Raymond Faulkner from Papyri in the British Museum*, New York, 1972, p. 10; S. QUIRKE, *Going out in daylight: "prt m hrw"*, *GHP Egyptology* 20, London, 2013, p. 106, 108, 110, 113-115, 116, 117.

⁸ A. PIANKOFF, *The tomb of Ramsess VI*, *BollSer* 40, New York, 1954, fig. 80, pp. 280-281.

⁹ H. BONNET, *RÄRG* 1, Berlin, 1952, col. 682, s. v. "Schlange".

¹⁰ K. LEPSIUS, *Das Totenbuch der Ägypter nach dem Hieroglyphischen Papyrus in Turin*, Leipzig, 1842, Pl. LXI, LXV, LXVII.

¹¹ A. PIANKOFF, *op. cit.*, p.158, fig. 39, fig. 42, p.172, p.186, fig. 53-54, p. 214, fig. 86, p. 222, fig.73.

¹² A. PIANKOFF, *op. cit.*, p.145-146.

and in the *Book of Amduat* where it is shown from the 7th to the 12th hour¹³. In addition, the variety of snakes that occupied the Netherworld spew fire from their mouths to burn the enemies of the sun god and to illuminate his path in the hereafter¹⁴. Snakes spewing fire are cited in the lower register of the 9th hour of Amduat, and the four seated goddesses upon double snakes in the upper register of the 11th hour of the *Book of Amduat*.

2. Snakes as symbols of resurrection and regeneration in the afterlife

Snakes were considered a symbol of regeneration owing to their peculiar nature, as they shed their skin a number of times a year in what is called “molting”. This process happens to allow for the continued growth of the snake. When the skin of the snake outgrows its older layers, it simply sheds the outer layer and starts a fresh one. This is an ongoing process, as snakes grow all throughout their lives. Thus, a snake will never stop shedding until death¹⁵. It is perhaps this natural phenomenon that undergirds the use of snakes as symbols of rebirth and resurrection, as it could be detected in Spell 87 of the *Book of the Dead*, as an example¹⁶.

This particular spell refers to the deceased’s wish to achieve daily renewal as the snakes shed their skins repeatedly. Moreover, snakes are linked to the underworld. Due to their nature, they can appear and disappear easily and hide under the ground, or as it could be named the “underworld”, in which they regenerate themselves. The royal books of the afterlife portray the snake as a symbol of rebirth, as in the middle register of the 6th hour of *Book of Amduat*, where the corpse of the sun god is surrounded and protected by a multi-headed snake; this vignette highlights the new rejuvenated life of the sun god¹⁷, and in 12th hour the sun god rejuvenates himself by entering the body of a snake¹⁸.

The snake is also considered a symbol of time as the snake *Iti-grh-ini-hrw*, “Who takes the night and brings the day”, who is responsible for swallowing the darkness and giving birth to the light¹⁹. In the first register of the 11th hour of the *Book of Amduat*, a snake is featured devouring ten stars as a symbol of the previous hours of the night, and in the same register, there are goddesses that are sitting on snakes symbolizing time²⁰. The renewal of the lifetime of the deceased is depicted in the 4th hour of the *Book of the Gates* as an endlessly huge snake representing the infinity of time. It is held by twelve gods who were “carrying lifetime in the west”.

The deceased's lifetime is renewed continuously as the sun god travels through the Netherworld; the blessed dead gain their lifetime and eternity, but the sinners are punished and deprived of their lifetime as the sun god's enemies²¹. The 3rd hour of the *Book of the Gates* represents a huge snake protecting and rejuvenating a group of mummies who stand in their

¹³ *Ibid.*, fig. 80, 82, 83, 85, 86, 87.

¹⁴ S. BINDER, “The Hereafter: Ancient Egyptian Beliefs with special reference to the Amduat”, in L. Donovan, K. McCorquodale (eds.), *Egyptian Art, Principles and Themes in wall scenes, Prism Archaeological Series 6*, 2000, p. 250-261; A. PIANKOFF, *op. cit.*, p. 254-312.

¹⁵ <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/animals/reptiles/group/snakes/>.

¹⁶ S. QUIRKE, *op. cit.*, p. 203.

¹⁷ A. PIANKOFF, *op. cit.*, fig. 79; S. BINDER, *op. cit.*, pp. 252-253.

¹⁸ A. PIANKOFF, *op. cit.*, p. fig. 87; S. BINDER, *op. cit.*, pp. 260-261.

¹⁹ W. BARTA, *Komparative Untersuchungen zu vier Unterweltsbüchern, MÄU 1*, Frankfurt, Bern, 1990, p. 79; *id.*, “Der Weg Sonnengottes durch die Unterwelt in Amduat und Höhlenbuch”, *GM* 100, 1987, p. 7 ff.

²⁰ A. PIANKOFF, *The tomb of Ramses VI, BollSer 40*, New York, 1954, fig. 86; S. BINDER, *op. cit.*, p. 290.

²¹ E. HORNING, *Idea into Image - Essays on Ancient Egyptian Thought*, New York, 1992, pp. 63-64; A. PIANKOFF, *op. cit.*, p. 162, fig. 40.

shrines²², and in the 6th hour of the same book, the deceased are rejuvenated on the back of the huge snake²³.

The snakes were also responsible for the renewal of the deceased's sexual prowess. The 3rd section of the *Book of the Caverns* represents the regeneration and restoration of the sexual power of the god Osiris while being surrounded with snakes and sun rays; in the 5th division of the *Book of Caverns*, Osiris is represented in mummified form with his regenerated *ba*, regaining his sexual power from the tall up-tailing snake²⁴. *The Book of Earth* also depicts this same concept in section A²⁵.

The final scene of the papyrus of *Hr-wbn* B, preserved in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo (Nr. SR 1\10254), represents the god Osiris laying with an erect phallus and surrounded by a huge snake to emphasize the resurrection concept in the Netherworld²⁶. Not only was the snake considered a symbol of resurrection, but also it was considered a symbol of primitivism; Spell 175 of the *Book of the Dead* mentions the final state of the world, when the Earth will be turned back into the primeval water (Nun) and the creator god Atum will be transformed into a form of snake²⁷.

Ancient Egyptians also represented the concept of resurrection through the circular snake named *sd-m-r3* "Tail in mouth"²⁸ or "Ouroboros" in the Roman period, meaning "The tail swallow"²⁹. The circular shape of this snake represents the empty space that surrounds the world on all sides; that space was reproduced continuously by he who remains, but the world which he composes sinks away and all gods and living beings disappears into the primeval water as the first state of the universe before creation occurred. The snake *sd-m-r3* is illustrated in the golden shrine of the king Tutankhamen surrounding the upper and lower part of a human mummified form³⁰; it is also depicted in some sources dating to the Third Intermediate Period, such as in the papyrus of *Hrt-wbn* SR VII 10256 (TR 14/7/35/6)³¹.

3. Snakes as providers of wealth and endless life in the Netherworld

The snake *Nhb-k3w* "Uniter of attributes" is provider of attributes (Kaw) for the deceased so they may live a blessed endless life in the Netherworld³². Spell 346 of the *Pyramid Texts* refers to the role of Nehebkau as a food supplier for the king. The papyrus Chester Beatty VIII A features this association between *Nhb-k3w* and Re in a spell to protect the various parts of the

²² A.PIANKOFF, *op. cit.*, p.151, fig. 35.

²³ E.HORNUNG, *The Ancient Egyptian Books of the Afterlife*, London, 1999, p. 62.

²⁴ A. PIANKOFF, *op. cit.*, fig.13, 14.

²⁵ A. PIANKOFF, *La création du disque solaire*, *BdE* 19, Le Caire, 1953, Pl. A; J. ROBERSON, *The Book of the Earth: a study of ancient Egyptian symbol-systems and the evolution of New Kingdom cosmographic models*, PhD Thesis, University of Pennsylvania, 2007., p. 932, Pl. 3.

²⁶ A. PIANKOFF, N. RAMBOVA, *Mythological Papyri I*, *BollSer* 40, New York, 1957, p.76; II: Pl. 2.

²⁷ R.FAULKNER, *The Ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead*, London, 1985, p. 175.

²⁸ *Wb* IV, p. 364, 4-7.

²⁹ L.KÁKOSY, *LÁ* VI, cols. 886-887, s. v. "Uroboros"; E.HORNUNG, *Conceptions of God in Ancient Egypt. The one and the many*, London, 1983, pp. 162-163.

³⁰ A.PIANKOFF, *Les Chapelles de Tout-anckhamon*, *MIFAO* 72, Cairo, 1952, pl. IV; A.PIANKOFF, *Une représentation rare sur l'une des Chapelles de Toutankhamon*, *JEA* 35, 1949, p. 113, fig. 1.

³¹ A. PIANKOFF, N. RAMBOVA, *Mythological Papyri II*, *BollSer* 40, New York, 1957, Pl. 1; E.HORNUNG, *The Ancient Egyptian Books of the Afterlife*, London, 1999, p. 178f.

³² A. SHORTER, "The God Nehebkau", *JEA* 21, 1935, p. 41-48.

human body through identification with their divine counterparts³³. *Nḥb-kꜣw* is the judge number forty in the Spell 125B, and he is depicted in the papyrus of *'Imn-ḥtp* as a multi-headed snake.

Another example comes from *Amduat*. In the middle register of the 12th hour of *Amduat*, the transformation of the sun, the rejuvenation takes place, inside the gigantic snake called “the one encircles the world” and “Ka of the one who gives life to the gods” and “life of the gods”. During this hour, the serpent is being carried behind the solar barque. Inside the snake, from its tail to its mouth, time is reversed; the evening becomes morning, and the old man becomes a child.

There are other examples referring to snakes as providers of prosperous life for the gods and the deceased in the Netherworld. For instance, in the upper register of the 7th hour of the *Book of Amduat*, there was a snake called “Life of forms” and “Life of spirits”³⁴. In the middle register of the 12th hour, the snake, who was carried behind the solar barque and is responsible for the rejuvenation of the sun, is named “Ka of the one who gives life to the gods” and “life of the gods”³⁵.

Conclusion

The owner of the Papyrus *'Imn-ḥtp* had a made-to-order papyrus because he is a high ranked official according to his titles: *'Imy-rꜣ kꜣdw n 'Imn* “The overseer of the builders of Amun”³⁶ and *'Imy-rꜣ kꜣwt m pr Mwt* “overseer of works in the house (Temple) of Mut”³⁷. The production of this type of elaborate papyri was expensive. The style of vignettes as well as the specification for using the Book of the Dead chapters might have been also decided by the owner himself.

The deceased seems to use the magical power of Spell 125B as a defense process and as confirmation of their purity, while supporting this text with the vignette of the judges in snakes form in order to gain protection, rebirth, and wealth in the afterlife. Protection is usually needed, because most of the judges are guardian demons. The vignette, in addition, depicts the fire resulting from the snakes' mouth to ward off enemies and supply light and protection for the deceased. Resurrection and rebirth in the Netherworld were connected with the shedding skin process of snakes and the rejuvenation concept. The receipt of wealth was tied to endless life in the hereafter. The owner or the writer and artist of the papyrus made this combination between text and vignettes to ascertain the magical effect of the spell and to achieve their main goal, which is a blessed and endless life in the Netherworld.

³³ A. GARDINER *Hieratic Papyri in the British Museum. Third series-Chester Beatty gift I*, London, 1935, p. 69.

³⁴ A. PIANKOFF, *The tomb of Ramses VI, BollSer 40*, New York, 1954, p. 280, fig. 80.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, fig. 87.

³⁶ J. TAYLOR *An Index of Male Non-Royal Egyptian Titles- Epithets & phrases of the 18th dynasty*, London, 2001, p. 51, Nr. 471.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 54. Nr. 496.



Fig. 1. Papyrus of 'Imn-*htp* (BM EA 10489, 8 Recto)
(Courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum).



Fig. 2. Papyrus of 'Imn-ḥtp (BM EA 10489, 9 Recto)
(Courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum).